

## Great depression hits JAFAs-land

Keep away from Auckland for a while; it's not itself.

The second lockdown has caused JAFAs to develop dark circles under their eyes and talk of getting out.

We drove up last weekend for a grandchild's ninth birthday, permitted by Auckland re-opening its border just in time.

We were going to fly. Good old Air NZ refunded our tickets to the UK and back (we should be in Aberdeen right now), but wouldn't extend that courtesy to return flights between New Plymouth and Auckland, an essential part of our abandoned UK trip.

We were going to use the credits for our birthday dash, but in the end opted for the flexibility of driving our car up there in case we couldn't fly home.

When we logged in to our usual Auckland BnB we ran into good friends Booking.com, who assailed us with reminders that if we didn't turn up we would forfeit several hundred dollars.

I sent them an email with my own conditions: if we couldn't get to Auckland because of a sudden COVID re-lockdown, we would pay nothing.

It was an interesting drive. We haven't been up that way for nearly two years, and there were noticeable changes.

First were the roadworks to bypass Awakino Valley's one-way tunnel, something we were encouraged to study because temporary traffic lights controlling another one-way section broke down.

The 20-minute delay gave me time to question the strategy of bypassing the tunnel with two new bridges that cut across a loop in the Awakino River. I reached the inexpert view that if they diverted the river a bit, there would be no need for the expensive bridges.

The other thing to strike us (only figuratively, thank heavens) was the constant tide of giant trucks, some with nearly a half century of wheels, all of them chewing up the road surface, especially along the coast between Mokau and Tongapōrutu.

There's irony in the fact the road over Mt Messenger has rarely been in better condition. That stretch ought to be retained as an alternative scenic route.

A sad thing we noticed was the closed doors of small cafes and the like in the small towns. We had afternoon tea at one place big enough to take a couple of bus-loads of Waitomo Caves tourists but whose long rows of food cabinets were largely undisturbed. My muffin was stale.

Auckland was a masked ball, but an inconsistent one. By my informal count at St Lukes shopping centre on that first "free" Saturday shopping day, only two thirds wore something on their faces.

Opinions seemed to be split within families. Some parents wore masks but their kids didn't, while the reverse applied to others, with the offspring displaying wisdom apparently not shared by mum or dad. That showed in what little we could see of their expressions.

One social group was invariably unmasked - old men on their own, looking bewildered or defiant.

Shop staff were mostly masked, with the exception of the waitress who served in a cafe, which had dozens in it even though a sign at its door said the limit was 10. Nobody but us seemed to be counting.

Everyone looked wary, tired, down, with the exception of those whose ethnicity suggested recent migration to this country.

Always masked, they were business-as-usual, powered by an energy that was noticeably higher-amped than that of the rest of us. To me, that suggests background stories of adversity, struggles to get here and re-establish, had better prepared them for what we all face now.

That's in contrast to the lucky Kiwi generations. Thank heavens: such optimistic citizens are showing how this must be confronted - with due care but a determination not to succumb to despair.

Our BnB hosts were debating more about where in New Zealand they will go than whether or not to abandon an Auckland business they've enjoyed for three decades. Both looked tired, a little depressed about the toll the second lockdown has taken.

We drove home thinking how airily we had dismissed the JAFAs during their ordeal. We'd arrived up there feeling smug. We came away humming the opening line of the Fred Dagg song.

Home again, I don't care about being the only one in the supermarket wearing an \$8 face shield - especially when they cost \$15 in Auckers (another good reason for Aucklanders to bail).